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Life after removal of 6-pound tumor is cause for celebration

March 13, 2014 | By Rebeca Piccardo and Robert Nolin, Sun Sentinel

After dodging doctors and living in pain for nearly three years, Marco Fermin was finally relieved of a weighty burden: a 6-pound tumor that threatened to condemn him to a wheelchair — or worse.

The surgery's outcome was iffy: Fermin, 39, would either awaken — possibly disabled — or lose his life. He said his goodbyes to loved ones before entering the operating room.

It took a six-surgeon team 16 hours to remove the volleyball-sized growth from Fermin's lower back and repair damaged bone and tissue.

Yet within two days of the February 2012 operation at Broward Health Medical Center, Fermin was sitting up and walking.

"He's a fighter," neurosurgeon Dr. Christopher Roberts, who led the surgical team, said Thursday as the hospital celebrated Fermin's near-complete recovery. "That's the kind of patient you want."

But Fermin, a physical trainer, had avoided treatment for more than three years.

Fermin said he felt discomfort in his back for about a year before intense pain sent him to a local emergency room in October 2008. He was immediately admitted, X-rayed, and told he had a golfball-sized cancerous tumor that had to be removed.

He was also told that extracting the tumor would rob him of the ability to walk.

Fermin defied doctors and checked himself out of the hospital.

"I didn't like the options I was given," he said.

The gym owner embarked on an Internet odyssey through the world of alternative medicine, spending years pursuing different, sometimes outlandish, remedies. He drank pool chlorine for six months and imported scorpion venom from China.

Self-medication was effective for a while, but didn't help in the long run. "The Internet has a lot of things that don't work," Fermin conceded.

After being somewhat dormant, the tumor began growing aggressively about eight months before surgery. "It took over my body," he said. "The pain set in."

The now-massive growth, later diagnosed as a sacral chordoma tumor, caused Fermin to lose weight. He couldn't sit up or move his left leg. He was incontinent. His family took turns caring for him. "At this point my family was suffering," he said.

Fermin's brothers forcibly drove him to Broward Health Medical Center, where he met Roberts. Fermin changed his mind about having surgery after that meeting. The risks were similar to those explained to him years back, he said, but Roberts' approach was more reassuring and he was willing to put his life in the surgeon's hands.

"He was more humane about it," Fermin said.

Roberts assembled the best team of surgeons he knew. For weeks they studied how best to approach the tumor. "Something this large is quite rare," he said.

Roberts and his team attacked the tumor from behind, and had it out in about six and half hours.

"This is by far the largest tumor I've taken out," the surgeon said. "Then there was a big hole."

Plastic surgeons used muscles from Fermin's abdomen to fill the hole left in his back. Overall, the surgery lasted more than 16 hours.

"If you assemble the right team, it can be seamless," Roberts said.

One challenge for the team was to make sure the nerves surrounding the growth were spared during its removal.

"We were able to spare the nerves," said Roberts. But Fermin's pelvis, tailbone and bowels needed to be

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reconstructed, with titanium rods stabilizing some bones.

Fermin now walks with a brace on his left leg, but he's back training mixed martial arts fighters. And he's adjusted his outlook on life.

"I changed my diet, my living conditions, my interactions with other people," he said. "I am more humble."

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